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Fact check: Fetal tissue not in your food, drinks, experts say

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The claim: Artificial flavors contain aborted fetal cells

A Jan. 5 Instagram video (direct link, archive link) shows a man talking in front of a background that includes pictures of popular snack foods and soft drinks.

“Everything we eat from coca cola to Nestle Tea has aborted babies in it,” the man in the video says. “That’s right. All of the companies have a common ingredient, which is Senomyx. If you look it up, Senomyx is a flavor enhancer made from aborted fetal cells.”

The video was liked more than 900 times in 26 days.

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Our rating: False

The Food and Drug Administration says fetal tissue is not allowed in any form in food. A flavoring company uses a cell line derived from fetal kidney cells to test and identify artificial flavors for further development, but those cells do not end up in the food consumers eat.

Cells derived from fetal tissue don't go in food

An FDA official said fetal tissue would never be allowed in food.

“There are no conditions under which the FDA would consider human fetal tissue to be safe or legal for human or animal consumption,” the official said. “The FDA is not aware of any company ever putting fetal cells into food products and has therefore not taken any enforcement action against any company for putting fetal cells into food products.”

This claim echoes misleading claims that aborted fetal cells were used in the development of the COVID-19 vaccines. Research in medicine and food alike uses cell lines, which are cloned copies of cells that have been grown continually in labs from original cells that may date back decades.

At the core of this claim is a cell line known as HEK293 – Human Embryonic Kidney 293 – which Dr. Frank Graham, now professor emeritus at McMaster University in Canada, created 50 years ago.

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HEK293 was created from fetal kidney tissue, although Graham stressed to USA TODAY that it is “far removed from that source” after decades of growing new cells for research purposes.

“Because … the 293 cell line can be cultured forever in unlimited amounts, the cells to a large extent eliminate the need to use (fetal) tissue for most biological research and for manufacture of a vast array of medical products,” Graham said in an email.

The social media claim contends the cells came from aborted fetuses, but Graham has never said that they did. He has previously said he did not know if the origin was related to an elective abortion or a spontaneous miscarriage. Alexander van der Eb, who provided the original cultured kidney cells that would become HEK293, expressed the same uncertainty at an FDA meeting in 2001.

Graham said HEK293 is particularly attractive to researchers because the cells have “an unlimited life span and therefore can divide forever.” The cells can also take up DNA very efficiently, for reasons Graham said are not fully understood.

Firmenich, an international fragrance and flavor company, acquired the taste platform that uses HEK293 in its 2018 acquisition of Senomyx. Firmenich does not say on its website that HEK293 is part of the flavor testing process, but a patent granted to Senomyx in 2008 spells out how the cell line can be used to test flavors.

A Senomyx executive previously described the platform as “a robotic tasting system” that uses isolated human taste receptors in the form of proteins. Flavorings are added to the proteins and researchers note which samples get a positive reaction from the proteins. Those showing promise are then moved along to other forms of testing that do not use the proteins.

Firmenich did not respond to a request for comment. Andrea Duarte, a spokesperson for Firmenich, told Reuters, “Neither Firmenich products nor Senomyx products have ever contained any human cell or material.”

USA TODAY reached out to the social media user making the claim for comment.

The Associated Press and Reuters also debunked versions of this claim.

Our fact-check sources:

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